FINDING BATMAN

EXACTLY ***THIRTY YEARS AGO,*** I VENTURED INTO AN AUDITION FOR A CHARACTER I KNEW ***LITTLE*** ABOUT, IN A MEDIUM I HAD NO EXPERIENCE IN.

HIS FLAWED HUMANITY, HIS OVERCOMING LIFE'S CHALLENGES, HIS HAVING A PUBLIC FACE AND A PRIVATE ONE--ALL THESE CHARACTERISTICS ***RESONATED*** WITH PEOPLE.

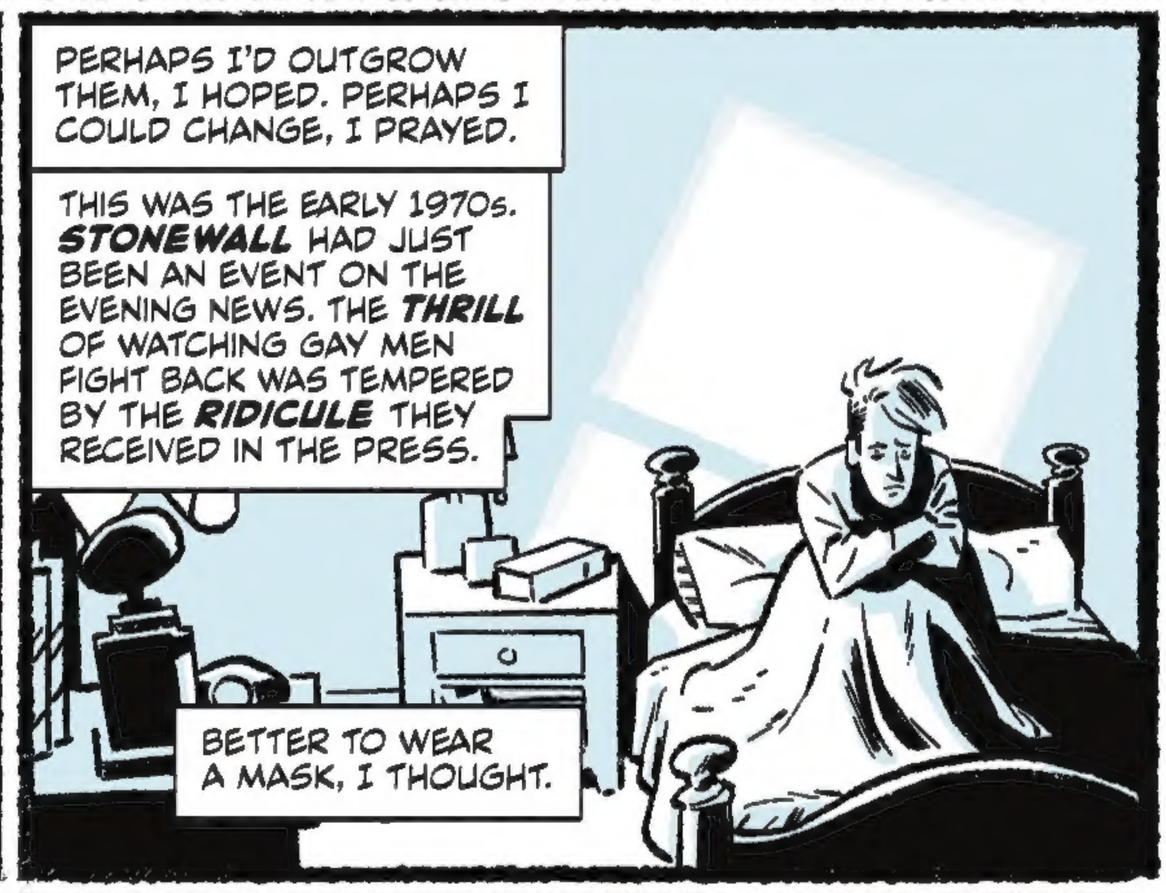
Written by KEVIN CONROY

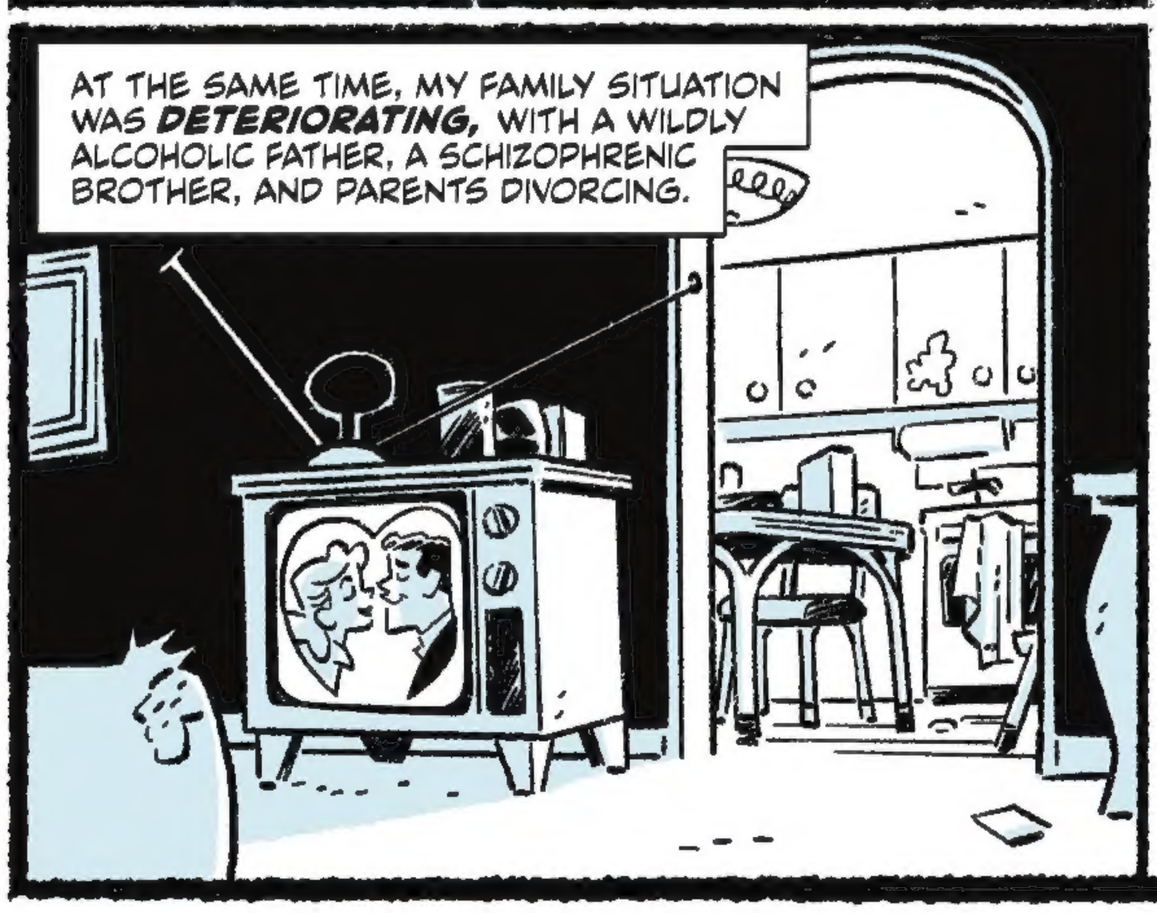
Drawn & Colored by J. BONE

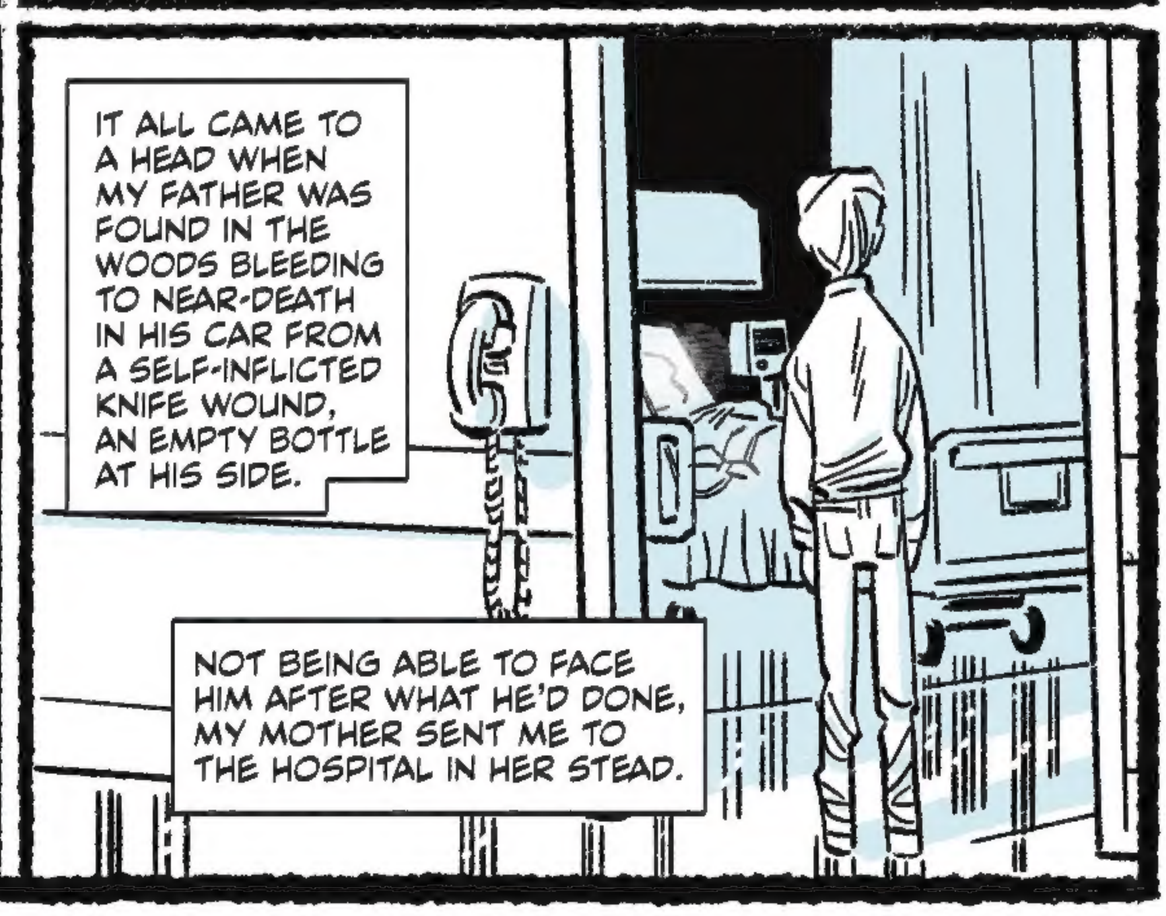
Lettered by ADITYA BIDIKAR

Adaptation Editor ARIANNA TURTURRO

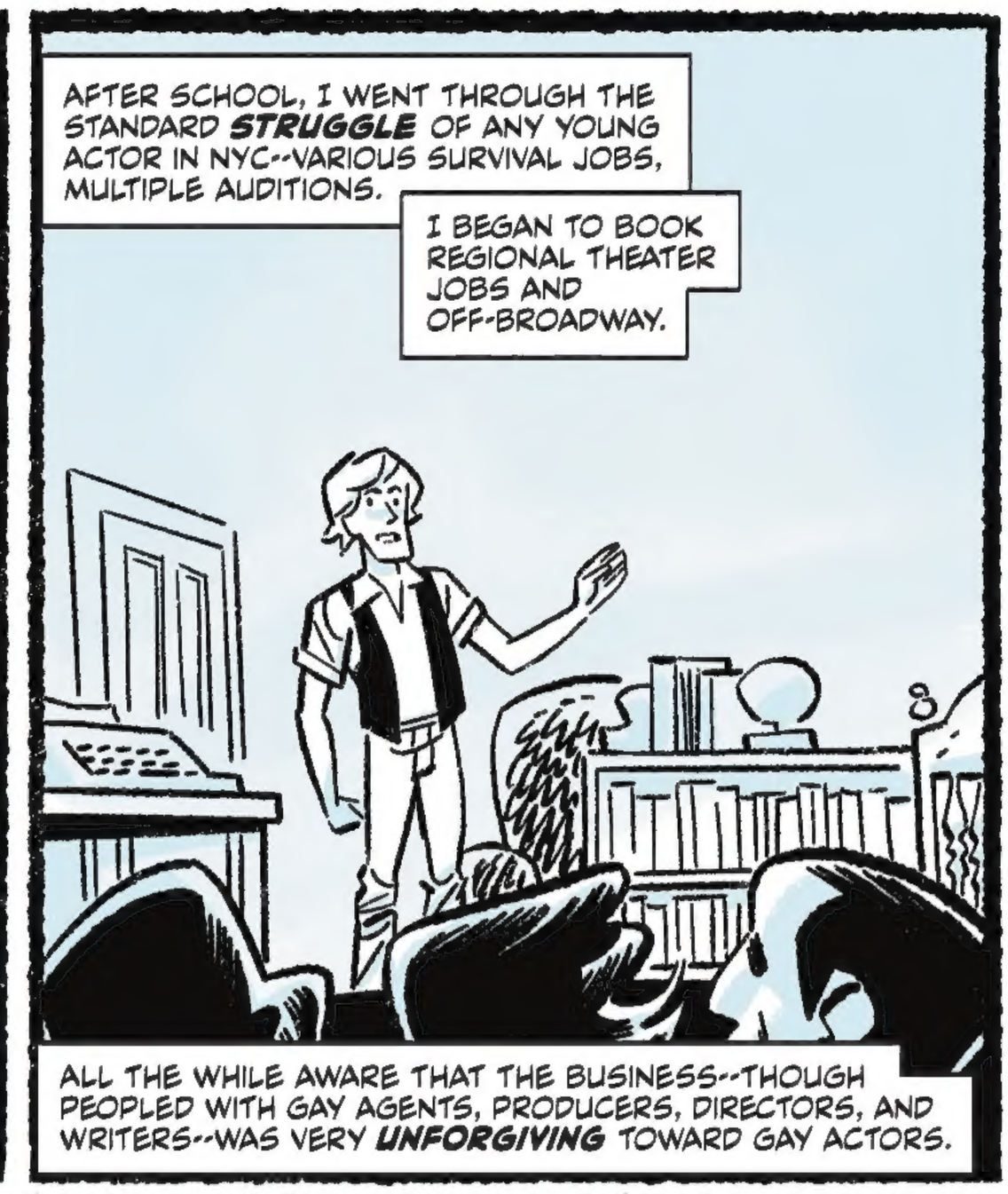
Editor JESSICA CHEN



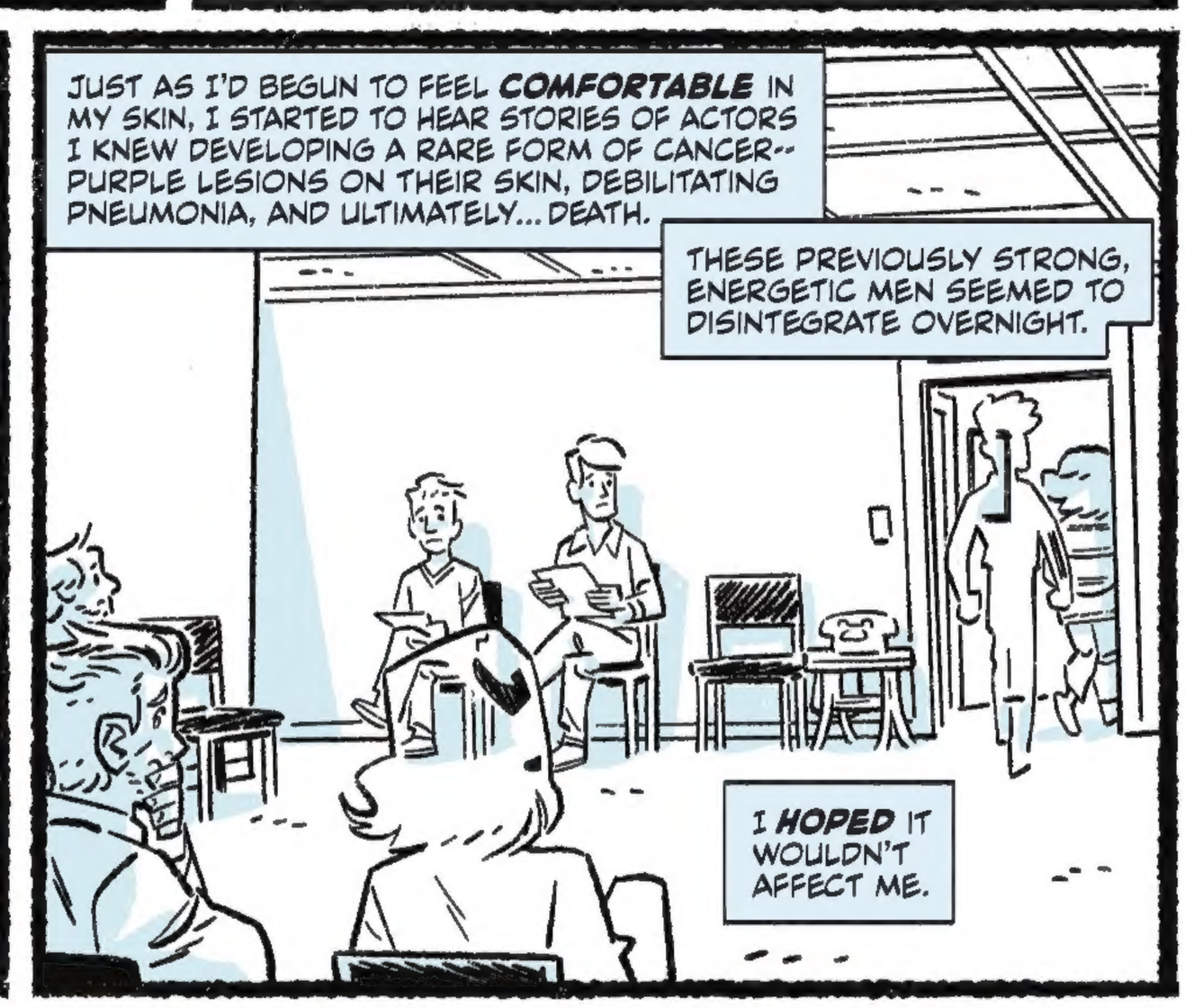




WITH NO FAMILY ***SUPPORT*** TO RELY ON, I HAD TO GET A SCHOLARSHIP TO ANY SCHOOL I HOPED TO ATTEND. ***JUILLIARD*** OFFERED THAT OPPORTUNITY.
THE COMPETITION WAS FIERCE--ANY FLAW OR WEAKNESS MAGNIFIED.
AN ATTITUDE SETTLED IN FOR ME THAT I WAS ***ON MY OWN.***


AFTER SCHOOL, I WENT THROUGH THE STANDARD ***STRUGGLE*** OF ANY YOUNG ACTOR IN NYC--VARIOUS SURVIVAL JOBS, MULTIPLE AUDITIONS.
I BEGAN TO BOOK REGIONAL THEATER JOBS AND OFF-BROADWAY.
ALL THE WHILE AWARE THAT THE BUSINESS--THOUGH PEOPLED WITH GAY AGENTS, PRODUCERS, DIRECTORS, AND WRITERS--WAS VERY ***UNFORGIVING*** TOWARD GAY ACTORS.

IN ORDER TO WORK, THE MASK HAD TO BE FIXED.
BUT I ***REFUSED*** TO SPEND MY LIFE ALONE JUST TO FACILITATE A CAREER. SO WHILE I WOULD NOT DENY WHO I WAS IN MY ***PRIVATE*** LIFE, I KEPT IT QUIET PROFESSIONALLY.
OF COURSE, NOTHING STAYS SECRET IN THEATER, SO WORD GOT AROUND...ESPECIALLY WHEN I PLAYED A FEW FAIRLY HIGH-PROFILE GAY ROLES.


JUST AS I'D BEGUN TO FEEL ***COMFORTABLE*** IN MY SKIN, I STARTED TO HEAR STORIES OF ACTORS I KNEW DEVELOPING A RARE FORM OF CANCER--PURPLE LESIONS ON THEIR SKIN, DEBILITATING PNEUMONIA, AND ULTIMATELY... DEATH.
THESE PREVIOUSLY STRONG, ENERGETIC MEN SEEMED TO DISINTEGRATE OVERNIGHT.
I ***HOPED*** IT WOULDN'T AFFECT ME.

THEN ***FRIENDS*** BEGAN GETTING IT. MY AGENT, HIS ASSISTANT, ACTORS I KNEW AND ADMIRED.
FUNERALS BECAME COMMON.
A WHOLE GENERATION OF MEN, MY GENERATION, WAS SUDDENLY AT RISK OF CONTRACTING WHAT BECAME KNOWN AS ***AIDS.***
WHAT HAD BEEN UNTHINKABLE SUDDENLY BECAME MY NEW REALITY.

THEN CAME AN UNEXPECTED AND EMBARRASSING MOMENT. I'D BEEN SHOOTING A MINI-SERIES ON LOCATION.
ONE NIGHT AFTER A VERY LONG AND DIFFICULT DAY, WE GATHERED AT THE LOBBY BAR OF OUR HOTEL.
THE PLACE WAS PACKED. AS I WALKED IN, ONE ACTOR WHO'D OBVIOUSLY BEEN THERE FOR A WHILE ANNOUNCED TO THE ROOM IN A BOOMING VOICE--
HEY, IT'S THE FAGGOT!
GET IN HERE AND JOIN US!
WHAT TO DO--LAUGH IT OFF? CONFRONT IT?
I DECIDED TO IGNORE IT.
I'VE GOT AN EARLY CALL TOMORROW. JUST WANTED TO SAY GOOD NIGHT.
DISCOMFORT ON SET FOLLOWED AND EVENTUALLY PASSED...
...BUT I WOULD ALWAYS BE "OTHER" NO MATTER WHAT I DID.

YEARS LATER, A REAL EYE-OPENER HAPPENED.

FOR ***THREE WEEKS*** I'D BEEN SHOOTING A FILM IN A GRITTY DOWNTOWN NEIGHBORHOOD OF L.A. WITH A GRUELING SCHEDULE OF SIX P.M. TO SIX A.M.

I WAS ***EXCITED*** ABOUT THE CHARACTER--A MAN WHO SLOWLY DEVOLVES OVER THE MOVIE, BECOMING MORE AND MORE UNHINGED.

THE ***CHALLENGE*** WAS NOT JUST GETTING INTO THE HEAD OF THIS MAN, BUT ALSO TO PORTRAY HIS DISINTEGRATION WHILE SHOOTING THE SCRIPT ENTIRELY ***OUT OF SEQUENCE.***

I HAD ***DISSECTED*** MY SCRIPT INTO DIFFERENT STAGES WITH DISTINCTLY COLORED PAGES AND PENS--

ONE COLOR FOR HIS PHYSICAL INJURIES, ONE COLOR FOR HIS PSYCHOLOGICAL STATE OF DISREPAIR, ONE COLOR FOR HIS EMOTIONAL LIFE, ANOTHER FOR HIS WARDROBE DISINTEGRATION, WITH NOTES FOR WHAT HAD IMMEDIATELY PRECEDED EACH SCENE SO I KNEW WHERE I WAS COMING FROM.

AND THAT'S A WRAP!

THANK YOU, EVERYBODY, YOU'VE BEEN TERRIFIC.

HEY, KEV!

HOPE YOU DON'T MIND. TOOK A PEEK AT YOUR SCRIPT--FASCINATING STUFF!

OH, THANKS. YEAH, I NEEDED A ***ROAD MAP*** TO TRACK--

SURE, ***SURE!*** LOOK-- WHAT ARE YOUR PLANS AFTER THIS?

HE SAID THERE WAS A TV PILOT HE'D BEEN WORKING ON--A BUDDY-COP SHOW.

HE FELT I WAS PERFECT FOR ONE OF THE LEADS AND WANTED TO KNOW IF I COULD STAY IN TOWN IN CASE THE NETWORK WANTED TO MEET ME. BUT HE WOULDN'T KNOW FOR A COUPLE OF DAYS.

I NEEDED TO VISIT THE EAST COAST FAIRLY SOON, BUT SINCE I WAS SORT OF ON MY OWN SCHEDULE, I TOLD HIM OKAY.

I CALLED MY BROTHER, ***CHRIS,*** THE NEXT MORNING TO EXPLAIN THAT I WAS DELAYING MY TRIP.

IT WASN'T EASY TO MAINTAIN A HOUSE BACK IN ***CONNECTICUT*** FOR MY BROTHER TO LIVE IN WHILE I WORKED REGULARLY IN L.A., BUT IT WAS THE HOUSE WE'D GROWN UP IN. MY FATHER HAD LEFT IT TO ME TO LOOK AFTER FOR CHRIS AS I ACTED AS HIS CARETAKER.

IT WAS AN IDEAL WAY TO KEEP HIM OUT OF THE HOSPITAL AND ON HIS MEDS. HE ***LOVED*** LIVING IN THAT HOUSE.

THANKFULLY, HE HAD A WONDERFUL PSYCHIATRIC SOCIAL WORKER NAMED ***GERRY*** WHO WOULD CHECK IN ON HIM. THINGS ONLY BROKE DOWN WHEN CHRIS WENT OFF HIS MEDS...WHICH WAS NOT UNCOMMON.

THREE DAYS WENT BY AND I STILL HADN'T HEARD FROM THE PRODUCER, SO I CALLED HIS OFFICE AND LEFT A MESSAGE ***REMINDING*** HIM THAT I WAS WAITING.

THE NEXT MORNING, I TRIED THE PRODUCER'S OFFICE AGAIN. I WAS FINE WITH NOTHING COMING OF THIS, I JUST HAD TO KNOW WHETHER I WAS ***FREE*** TO LEAVE.

BUT HE NEVER RETURNED MY CALL.

LATER IN THE DAY, I WENT TO VISIT A FRIEND IN THE HOSPITAL WHO WAS IN THE LAST STAGES OF AIDS. HE WAS A CASTING DIRECTOR WHO'D ALWAYS CHAMPIONED MY WORK.

WE WERE EXACTLY THE SAME AGE AND GREW UP JUST A FEW MILES FROM EACH OTHER IN THOSE MIDDLE-CLASS SUBURBS ON LONG ISLAND.

BOTH FROM ***IRISH FAMILIES*** AND ***CATHOLIC SCHOOLS*** AND DRAWN TO THE THEATER. PARALLEL LIVES THAT HADN'T INTERSECTED UNTIL L.A.

NOW I WAS PART OF A GROUP OF FRIENDS THAT TOOK TURNS BY HIS BED AS HE DRIFTED INTO THE CLOUDS OF DEMENTIA.

HE HAD WRITTEN A PLAY ABOUT BEING GAY AND LIVING WITH AIDS IN HOLLYWOOD. ONE OF US HAD GOTTEN THE IDEA TO TELL HIM IT WAS GOING INTO PRODUCTION AND WE NEEDED HIM TO ***DIRECT*** US.

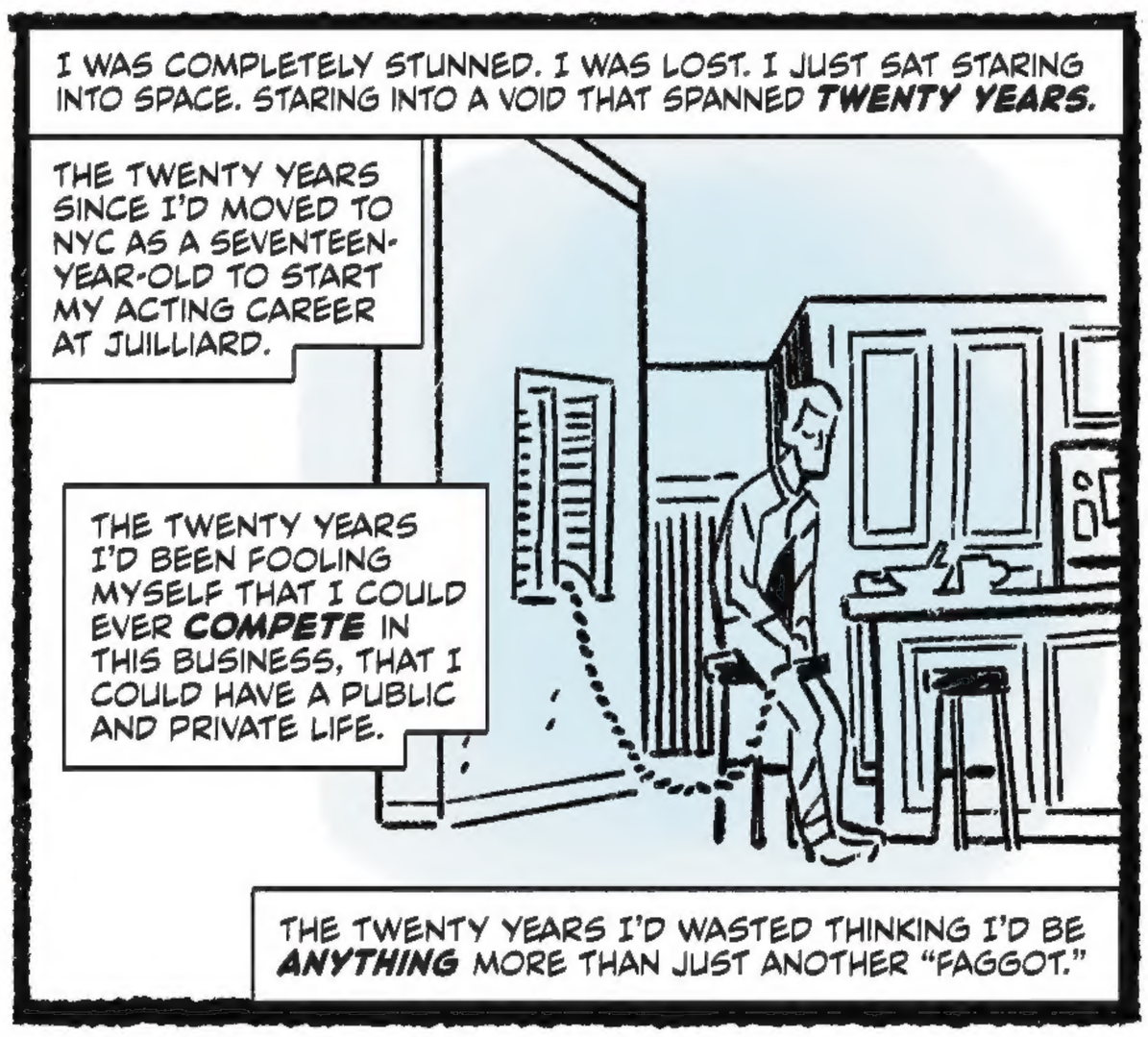
WE EACH ASSUMED A ROLE AND PRETENDED WE WERE IN A ***REHEARSAL*** FOR HIS PRODUCTION.

I TRIED TO REACH THE ELUSIVE PRODUCER ONE LAST TIME. I'D DECIDED IF HE **STILL** WASN'T AVAILABLE, I'D JUST HEAD BACK TO SEE CHRIS.
THE PHONE CLICKED AND THE PRODUCER'S VOICE CAME ON...

HEY **FAGGOT,** HOW YOU DOING?!
THAT GUT PUNCH AGAIN. LIKE IN THE BAR SO MANY YEARS BEFORE WITH THE DRUNK ACTOR.

SO, WE'RE NOT GOING TO NEED YOU. I WENT IN THERE AND PITCHED YOU AND, **MAN,** THE REACTION WAS **NOT** WHAT I EXPECTED AT ALL.
I MEAN, WOW, THERE'S **A LOT** ABOUT YOU I JUST DIDN'T KNOW.
HONESTLY, YOU COULD HAVE **WARNED** ME BEFORE I GOT MY ASS HANDED TO ME.

LOOK, JUST A HEADS-UP BETWEEN US? YOU CAN **FORGET** THAT NETWORK--THEY'LL NEVER HIRE YOU FOR A LEAD. SO HAVE A GOOD TRIP. GOOD LUCK, OKAY?


I WAS COMPLETELY STUNNED. I WAS LOST. I JUST SAT STARING INTO SPACE. STARING INTO A VOID THAT SPANNED **TWENTY YEARS.**
THE TWENTY YEARS SINCE I'D MOVED TO NYC AS A SEVENTEEN-YEAR-OLD TO START MY ACTING CAREER AT JUILLIARD.
THE TWENTY YEARS I'D BEEN FOOLING MYSELF THAT I COULD EVER **COMPETE** IN THIS BUSINESS, THAT I COULD HAVE A PUBLIC AND PRIVATE LIFE.
THE TWENTY YEARS I'D WASTED THINKING I'D BE **ANYTHING** MORE THAN JUST ANOTHER "FAGGOT."

I WENT TO CONNECTICUT THE NEXT DAY. I'D PUT OFF SEEING CHRIS FOR LONG ENOUGH.

WHEN I GOT TO THE HOUSE AND RANG THE BELL, THERE WAS NO ANSWER. I RANG AGAIN. ***NOTHING.***

I HAD A KEY BUT TRIED TO RESPECT CHRIS'S SENSE OF PRIVACY BY LETTING HIM ANSWER THE DOOR. ***NOTHING STILL.***

SO I OPENED IT MYSELF. THE THICK SMELL OF ***CIGARETTE SMOKE*** ENVELOPED EVERYTHING INSIDE.

CHRIS?

WHUH? ***WHO'S*** THERE? ...WHO'S THERE?

CHRIS? GET UP. COME ON, GET UP...

WHAT?

GET UP! WHO'S ***UP?!*** IT'S ALL ABOUT ***NIXON***--NIXON AND ***EHRLICHMAN.***

SCREW YOU! SCREW YOU!

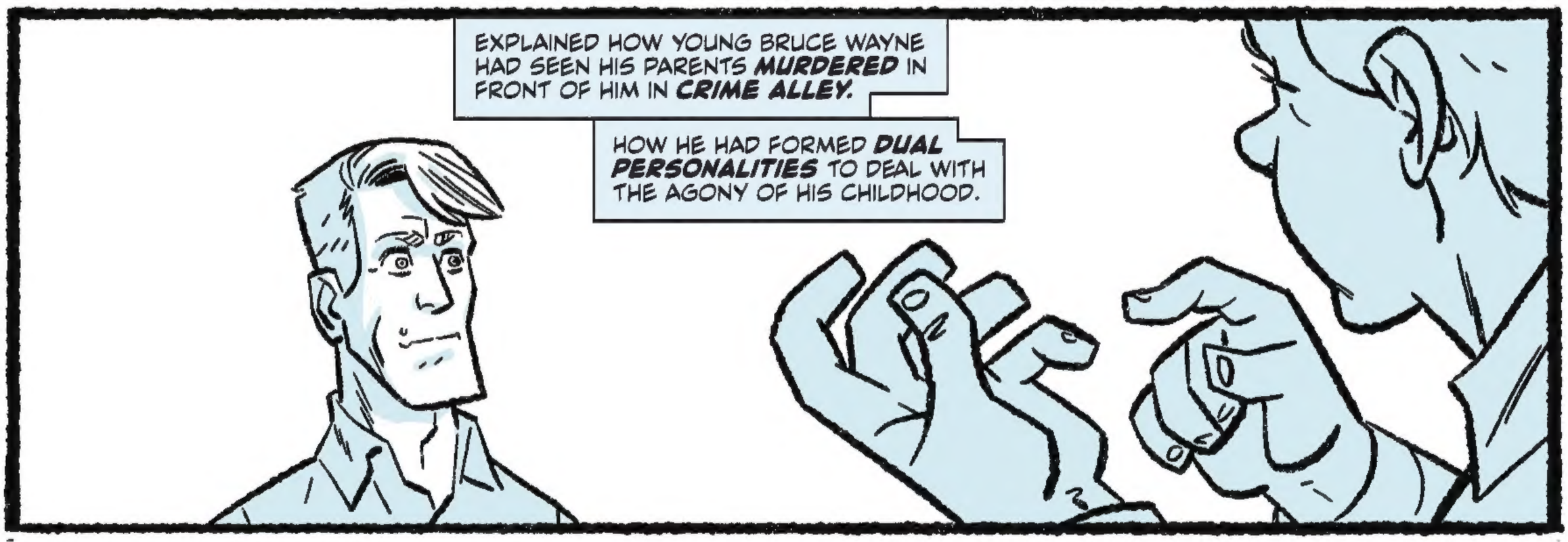
YOU FAGGOT!

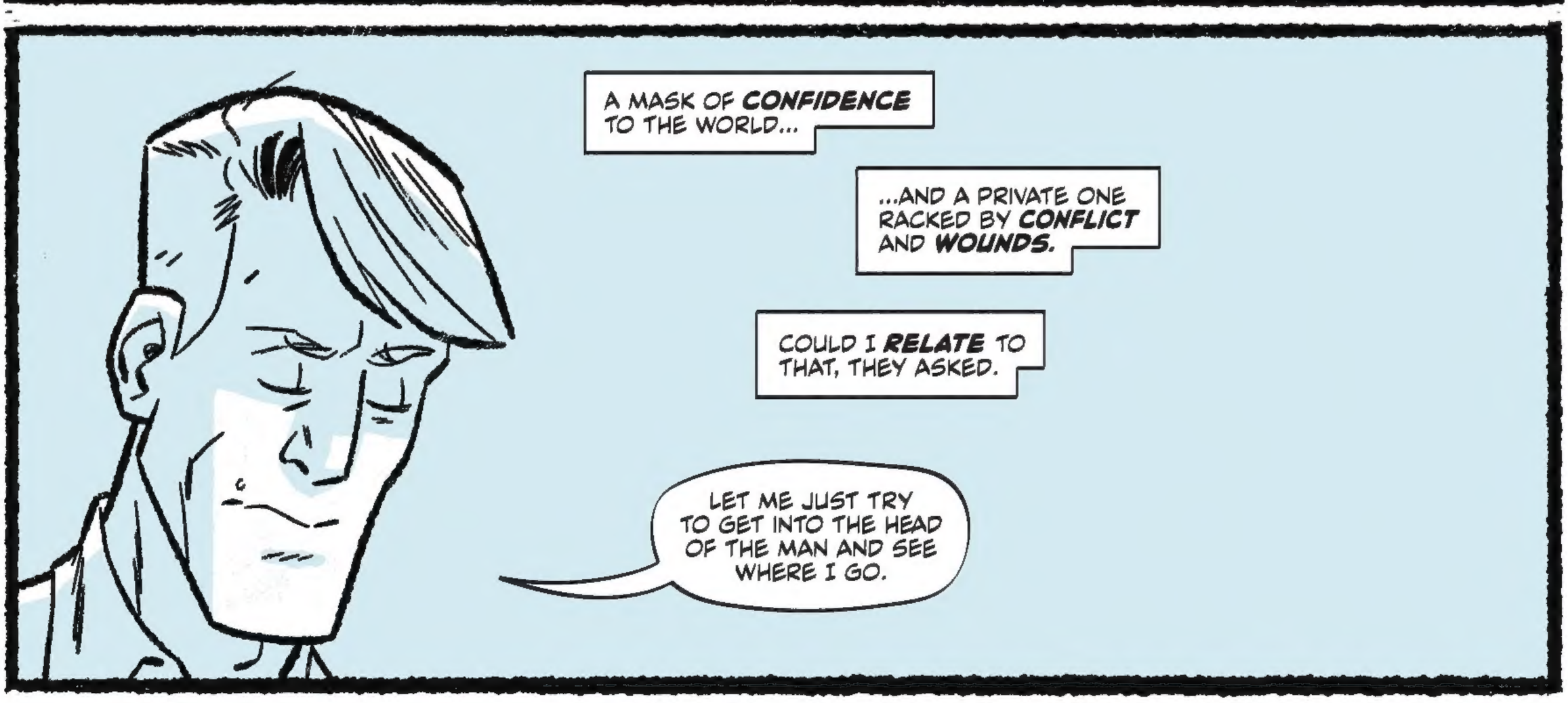
I FELT SOMETHING WITHIN ME SNAP. THE WAY HE'D ***HISSED*** THOSE WORDS JUST TORE THROUGH ME.

I CALLED THE PSYCH WARD, CALLED GERRY. IT WOULD BE COMPLICATED, BUT IT WAS TIME FOR CHRIS TO BE ADMITTED BACK IN.

THEN I GOT A CALL FROM MY VOICE-OVER AGENT ABOUT A NEW SERIES AT WB--*BATMAN: THE ANIMATED SERIES.*

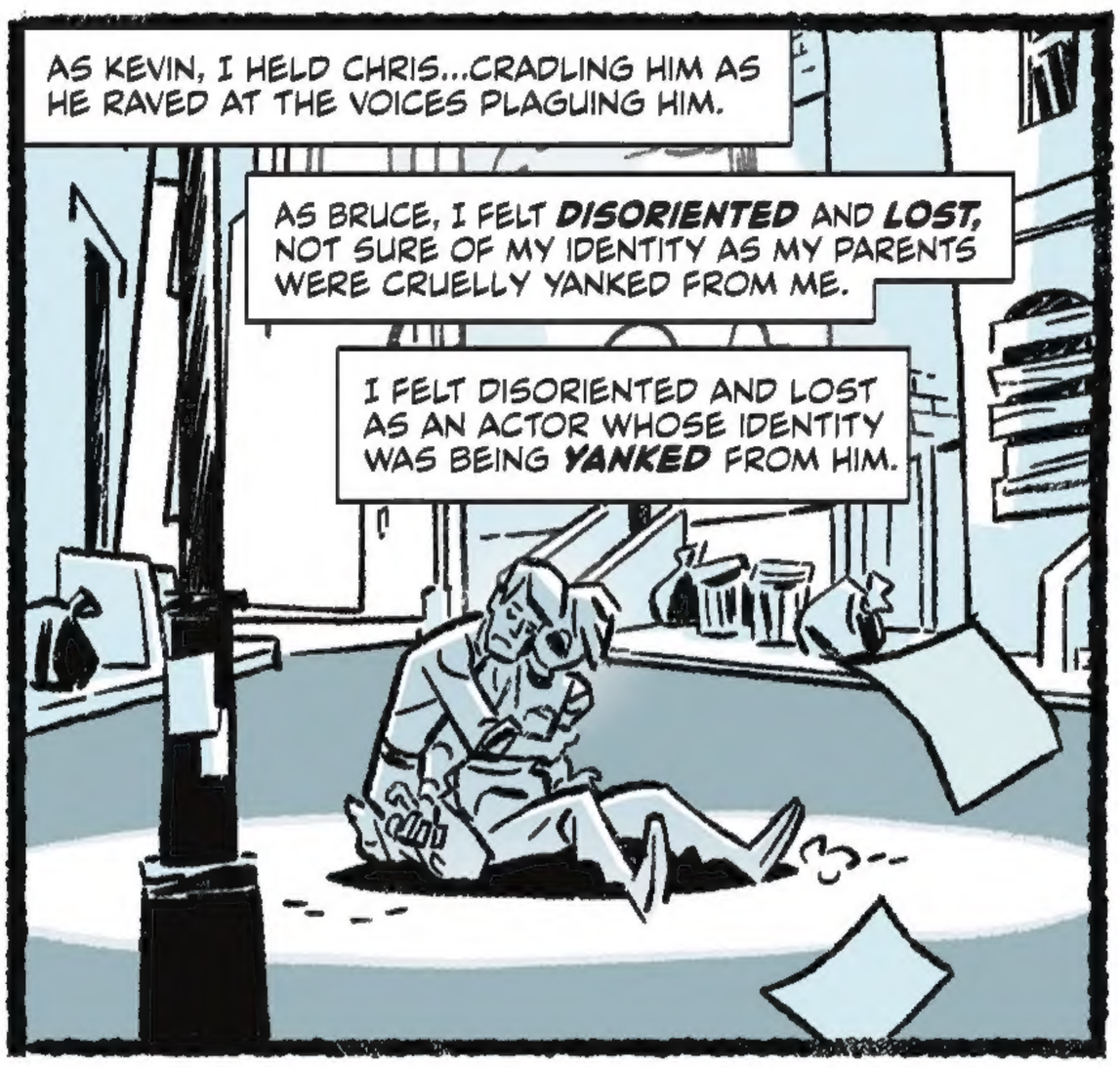
I WALKED IN AND MET THE CREATIVE TEAM OF ***BRUCE TIMM, ANDREA ROMANO, ERIC RADOMSKI,*** AND OTHERS.
THEY TALKED ME THROUGH THE CHARACTER.


EXPLAINED HOW YOUNG BRUCE WAYNE HAD SEEN HIS PARENTS ***MURDERED*** IN FRONT OF HIM IN ***CRIME ALLEY.***
HOW HE HAD FORMED ***DUAL PERSONALITIES*** TO DEAL WITH THE AGONY OF HIS CHILDHOOD.

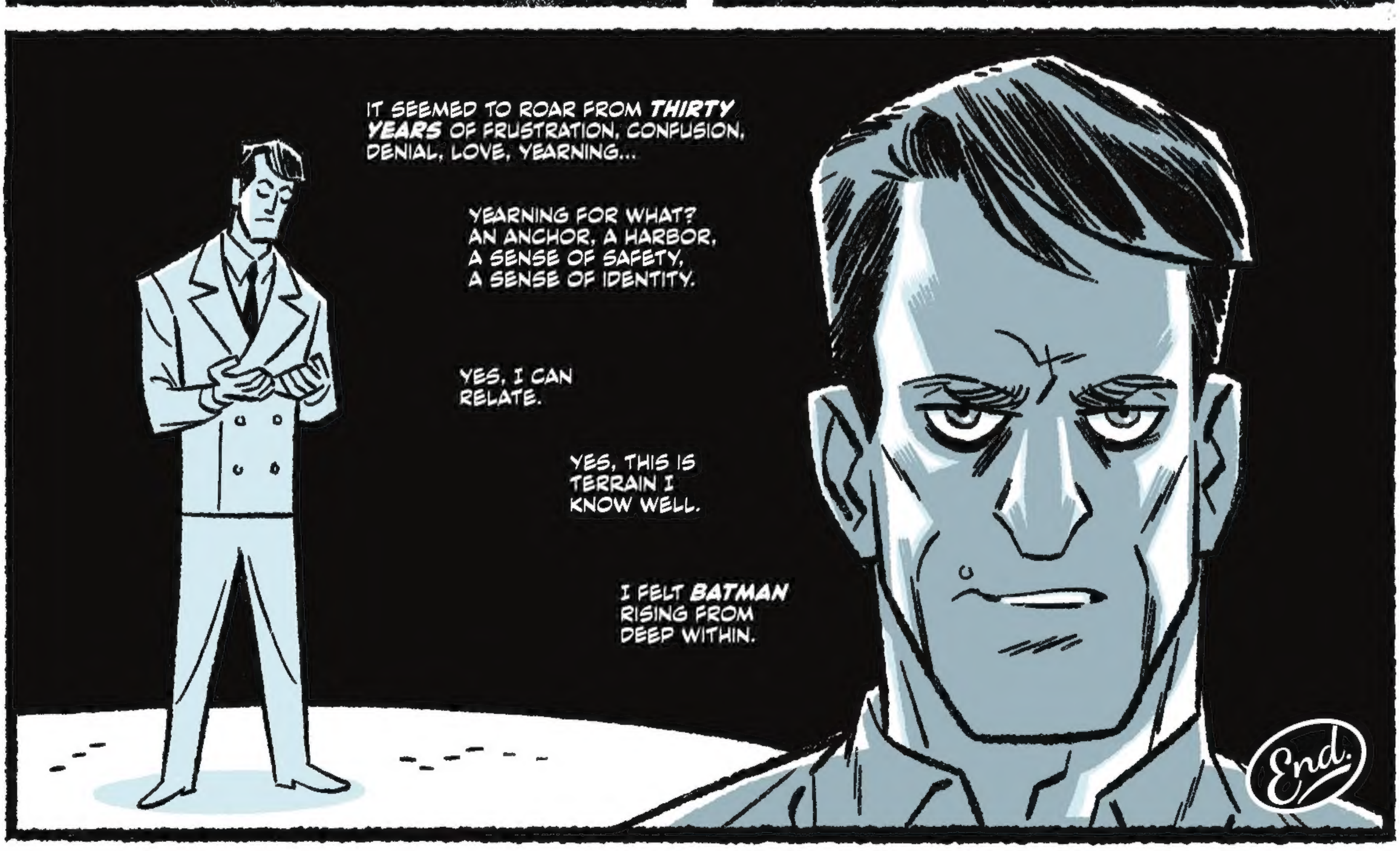

A MASK OF ***CONFIDENCE*** TO THE WORLD...
...AND A PRIVATE ONE RACKED BY ***CONFLICT*** AND ***WOUNDS.***
COULD I ***RELATE*** TO THAT, THEY ASKED.
LET ME JUST TRY TO GET INTO THE HEAD OF THE MAN AND SEE WHERE I GO.

I IMAGINED MYSELF AS YOUNG BRUCE WITNESSING MY PARENTS ATTACKED AND CRUMBLING IN FRONT OF ME.
I SAW THEM LYING IN THEIR BLOOD IN THE FILTH OF CRIME ALLEY.

I SAW MY OWN FATHER LYING DRUNK IN A POOL OF HIS DRIED BLOOD.
AS BRUCE, I HELD THEM, COMFORTING THEM IN MY ARMS...
...AS KEVIN, I CRADLED MY BLOODY FATHER AS HE STRUGGLED FOR LIFE.


AS KEVIN, I HELD CHRIS...CRADLING HIM AS HE RAVED AT THE VOICES PLAGUING HIM.
AS BRUCE, I FELT DISORIENTED AND LOST, NOT SURE OF MY IDENTITY AS MY PARENTS WERE CRUELLY YANKED FROM ME.
I FELT DISORIENTED AND LOST AS AN ACTOR WHOSE IDENTITY WAS BEING YANKED FROM HIM.

WAS I MY PUBLIC FACE OR MY PRIVATE FACE? HAD I MADE TOO MANY COMPROMISES?
MY HEART PULSED, I FELT MY FACE FLUSH, MY BREATH GREW DEEPER, I BEGAN TO SPEAK, AND A VOICE I DIDN'T RECOGNIZE CAME OUT. IT WAS A THROATY, HUSKY, RUMBLING SOUND THAT SHOOK MY BODY.


IT SEEMED TO ROAR FROM THIRTY YEARS OF FRUSTRATION, CONFUSION, DENIAL, LOVE, YEARNING...
YEARNING FOR WHAT? AN ANCHOR, A HARBOR, A SENSE OF SAFETY, A SENSE OF IDENTITY.
YES, I CAN RELATE.
YES, THIS IS TERRAIN I KNOW WELL.
I FELT BATMAN RISING FROM DEEP WITHIN.
End.